

Artificial Music Appreciation

by H. W. Moss

Seated in a booth opposite a lovely red headed woman, his back to the wall and a club sandwich staring him in the face, Don Hockney had the uncomfortable feeling he was being scrutinized from across the room.

With undeniable certainty, Hockney knew he was under the steady, fixed gaze of someone other than the woman with him at the table. He had no idea how he knew, but with the passing minutes between ordering his meal and its arrival, he had become aware of the intense interest someone was paying him. What had he done to attract this much attention, he wondered.

The hubbub of the bustling lunch time crowd jamming the restaurant rose a notch and promised to drown out all conversation, yet he made the attempt. “Ever have the feeling you’re being watched?” he asked and took a bite of his lunch.

Hockney marveled at how the unconscious mind works. He could not determine precisely what had given away his observer. Perhaps he had caught covert glances out of the corner of his eye one too many times and they finally registered, surfacing as a prickling along his neck, a tension that could no longer be ignored, converting themselves into the conviction that he was the focus of extreme attention.

Then again, he thought as he swallowed and licked his lips, he could be quite wrong. It may just be his imagination, and no one was really focusing attention on his noontime behavior. He took another bite.

“No. Not really. I’m not particularly paranoid,” the redheaded woman said. When her companion expanded his question no further, she added, “I cannot believe the

deadline is so soon,” continuing the conversation which had brought them together over lunch in the first place. “Did they move it up or something when I wasn’t looking?” The question was rhetorical; he let it lie unanswered.

Stella daintily twirled a mouthful of pasta -- spoon in one hand, fork in the other -- as she prepared it for manageable consumption. She was too engrossed in the task to notice anything as subtle as a stranger’s stare, so Hockney contemplated ways he might catch the viewer off guard. At the same time he tried to maintain a semblance of listening and paying attention to her. He surreptitiously patted his shirt pocket and could hear her better.

She swept on: “I’m telling you, Davis needs to have his critical path re-drawn, you ask me. We still have a dozen field surveys to collect, not to mention the stress tests that are in the oven, before we can write this up. What do you think, Don?”

Chewing prevented him from answering cogently. He mumbled a reply, nodded his head vigorously, as if he concurred. She failed to notice he actually said nothing. One edge of the triple-decked section of sandwich festooned with a red toothpick was on the verge of entering his mouth when he turned abruptly in his seat.

There! He was certain he saw a man, a tall fellow seated at the end of the counter wearing a yellow tie, quickly avert his eyes.

“You nervous or something?” Stella asked after he adjusted himself toward her again. It was an easy-going question only a long time friend would ask.

His smile was placatory as he removed the toothpick and consumed the rest of the portion without any of it falling onto his plate. He remained certain he was under surveillance.

“Love this fettuccine,” she said and returned his smile with equal innocence.

The noise surrounding them rose to an even higher din as newcomers took seats emptied by patrons who pushed their way toward the cash register. Nonchalantly, almost absent minded, Hockney made another movement with his right hand that looked as if he were tapping his chest. The room immediately quieted by half, but apparently Stella did not notice. She did, however, observe his gesture.

“You are such a nerd,” she said with a little laugh as she worked at cleaning the remaining cream sauce from her plate with a piece of sourdough bread. He took no offense since the comment was true. The plastic pen holder in his shirt pocket was his badge of honor.

The meal was over in another five minutes. Hockney paid with the company credit card, looked up as he signed his name, searched faces for any hooded expressions which might betray someone’s interest in him. The tall man he picked out before was gone. A woman had taken the vacant seat and Hockney convinced himself he was, indeed, just being paranoid.

Hockney and Stella returned to the industrial building that housed their laboratory. During the course of his walk back to work, Hockney’s thoughts returned to the experiment at hand and he completely forgot his suspicions over lunch.

* * *

Handel’s “Water Music” is almost perfect music to work by, Hockney thought as he picked up a chart on his desk. Lunch had been over for hours. He had changed into his lab coat and discarded his shoes in favor of the protective rubber galoshes that always reminded him of the rain boots he wore as a child.

Hockney particularly liked Handel's lively French horn section which, by design, cascaded over the listener, propelling rather than impeding one's thoughts. The background music filled the room and came from a classical radio station of Hockney's choosing.

Stella wore her hair tied back while at work. She stood beside Hockney in her own lab coat and peered over his shoulder. She was not quite as tall as his shirt collar. They were two hours into overtime and she felt as if she had worked straight through since morning.

Hoping he would get the hint, she held her wrist out, glanced at him, then back to the watch. He did not notice. She tried once more to suggest the time by holding her watch out for fully fifteen seconds. It was time to go. Home.

Stella knew the symptoms. Hockney could be so absorbed in multi-function regressions he did not know what day it was, let alone the time. When the French horns began pumping soft, strident notes into the air around them, Hockney was buoyed. She feared he had no intention of knocking off any time soon.

For the past several weeks Hockney was even more engrossed in the project than he had ever been. Though he often worked extended hours, he seemed more focused of late. He worked long stretches almost without a break, usually well after she had become exhausted.

Stella dreaded giving the lab the extra hours, but resigned herself to another night's work. "Think of the paycheck, girl," she reminded herself. Unlike Hockney, she was not salaried. In the background she was vaguely aware of the music piped throughout the lab.

The silence between selections, which sometimes stretched on for several minutes, was white noise she never noticed. Her only thought was to go home.

“I’ve entered the new parameters, Dr. Hockney.” Familiarities were left behind in the lab where she always referred to him by his title. Both wore white face masks. Hers hid a growing impatience. Only her eyes betrayed an expression of mild annoyance at being kept late again. “You can run the program any time.” Tomorrow, she wanted to add, run it tomorrow, but she said nothing.

“Looking straight at it,” Hockney said through his mask, “I’d say we ought to do just that.”

Hockney unconsciously waved his arm in time with the allegro tempo. He shifted in his seat and faced the computer keyboard just as the tone changed amid the interplay of wind instruments and strings. He brought his hands together like a concert master with a baton at ready. He keyed in the commands that would test the variables they had identified.

Another hour passed and they were still trying to sort out the results. No closer to solving the problem, Hockney at last glanced at the clock on the far wall. “Oops. Sorry Stella. I’ve kept you late again.”

She nodded politely at the understatement and gratefully took a step back from the work table. She removed her mask and unbuttoned her lab coat.

“Right. That’s it for the night. See you tomorrow.”

Their lockers were outside the sterile environment of the lab which was hermetically sealed behind two entrances from the other departments and administrative offices. The first door was a dust barrier. The second was a tighter fit that allowed air and

temperature inside the lab to be kept under careful control. Once inside, technicians were effectively cut off from the outside world.

The locker room was empty. Even the security people were on low alert since it was well after business hours.

Stella began to remove her smock in order to exchange it for her jacket. She stopped mid-way and became alarmed. Her locker was no longer closed. Its door hung open half an inch from the frame. She tentatively, cautiously, opened it the rest of the way and saw where the lock had been forced. It was obvious the interior had been vandalized.

Immediately, she reached for her purse, checked the contents, satisfied herself nothing had been taken. All her credit cards and cash were there although someone had spilled everything out of the wallet and into the bottom of the purse. She even found her cash, decided the vandal had been searching for something besides money.

“Stella,” she heard Hockney call from the other side of the row of lockers where he investigated his own space. “Have we been burgled?”

“Looks like it,” she replied somewhat resigned. “My locker’s been broken into. But I don’t think anything’s missing. Thank god for that. But someone went through my purse like a whirlwind.”

Hockney came around the lockers. He had slipped a casual civilian coat over his shoulders before he approached her. He reached inside the breast pocket for his wallet.

“All my money’s here,” he noted. “My checkbook’s here. No cards missing that I can tell.” Then, as an afterthought, he looked around the room. There were 250 more

lockers lining two walls from top to bottom. Each was assigned to someone in the lab, administration or personnel. No others showed signs of tampering.

“Have to tell security about this on the way out.”

Stella nodded tacit approval. “What do you think they were looking for?” she asked. “And why just our lockers?”

“Looking straight at it,” Hockney said, once again using his favorite phrase, “I have no idea whatsoever.”

* * *

For a mathematician of Hockney’s caliber, one who could iterate fractals of the Mandelbrot Set in his head (and envision the results), who knew which direction he was heading under a curve without taking a second derivative, Hockney had trouble putting two and two together.

All he listened to was the radio, at home or in the lab. And it was invariably the same station since he lived alone and, as head of the division, he got to choose the channel they played in the lab. Music was constantly on when Hockney worked. It helped him concentrate. The problem was, when the symphony ended a commercial took to the air, and he was distracted no end until the format resumed. He could not, as others claimed they could, tune out a commercial. Plus, the host naming the author and title in between pieces entered his cranium through his auditory nerve, transferred to his cerebrum and there played havoc with his concentration until another tune came on the play list.

A couple weeks ago it seemed to him that his concentration was continually being interrupted by commercials. Bent over a microscope or poking a circuit board with a

probe, when the music stopped he had about two seconds of meditative silence before he was brought up smack into the life-cycle of a hemorrhoid.

As far as Hockney was concerned, radio commercials were as intrusive as the suppositories they were selling. He had no intention of buying any item offered for sale in a spot announcement and realized one day that the quantity and quality of messages had shifted in favor of feminine hygiene and incontinency products. He figured that if half of every advertising dollar was wasted, now it was true for the other half.

Equally invasive were gardening tips, ski reports, and daily stock market reviews. Hockney did not participate in contests for tickets or nights on the town and he did not tune in to hear the weather, news, sports or a schedule of coming events. He rather doubted anyone else did either.

What he did tune in for was the music.

One Friday evening after a particularly annoying commercial had torn him away from a wireless telecommunications problem in which he was particularly engrossed, Hockney decided it was time to create his own personal blab-out.

After clearly outlining his problem, he decided the new Intel chip ought to have some application he could adapt.

Chopin's "Fantasy on Polish Airs" replaced a wine country commercial. He was thinking again.

Hockney's apartment was crammed with micro-electronic parts that over-flowed the work space in his second bedroom and threatened to take over the rest of his living area. Most of the parts were not his. They were on loan from his work bench at the lab. He had

carte blanche to take his projects home and liberally interpreted that to mean equipment too. However, even he had to admit he was probably fudging on the fudge factor.

It did not take him long to select the components and begin cobbling together a prototype. In one of his desk drawers he located a palm-sized dual-tone to multi-frequency generator from a telephone.

“Knew this would come in handy one day,” he said aloud as he began taking it apart with a set of jeweler’s screwdrivers. “Reverse the output, add a stronger power source to give it some range,” he muttered to himself just as a pantyhose commercial replaced Tchaikovsky’s first piano concerto. “I’ll have it radiating silence for 50 meters.”

The chip’s source-code manipulation caused him a few pangs of remorse. He was not supposed to have access to them, but of course he did.

“Illegal as hell, but easy enough to program,” he said aloud. “Still, this is in the interest of peace and quiet. A public service, that’s what it is. Give it a few tweaks here and there and I’ll have that chip reading sheet music.”

He needed a reprieve from the distraction created by radio voices, the noise and chatter created by announcers talking about their favorite restaurants, newscasters making silly-ass jokes to one another after having delivered a straight-faced account of a school bus accident. He had to tune out the stockbrokers who had no voice training, yet insisted on delivering the daily market report.

Hockney believed his own taste in music was rather mundane and did not really want to force it on anyone else. His taste tended toward the classics with an equal portion of jazz and a smattering of hard-rock on those days when he needed to feel like a youngster again. However, he had to start somewhere. The chip had a heuristic algorithm

which allowed it to build on rules of thumb. Ultimately, the processor accepted the alterations to its instruction code and he told it to emulate Hockney's own personal style of music appreciation. How to train it, that was the question.

His zapper simply had to distinguish between a symphony and a salesman. It should be able to turn down the sound on any commercial, test to see that music had returned before turning itself back up. He wanted music to fill the background of his brain, to wander in orchestral variety and leave big blank spaces in between selections. This would relieve his foreground gray matter of the responsibility of listening to someone selling a dating-service. Then he might get some work done.

Hockney spent the entire weekend on his new project. By Sunday night he had a working model no larger than a business card, with thumb-pots for gain and distance control.

The device was supposed to sample sound faster than the human ear and decide what was about to be played. It was programmed to recognize and filter out undesirable noise, Hockney's interpretation of undesirable noise, of course.

He sat back and powered it up. In the background, Smetena's "Moldau" from My Fatherland was coming to its graceful conclusion. Guided by Hockney's sense of what made good listening, the blab-out instantly distinguished between sound and music and radiated silence after the final fanfare died out. No commercial message followed.

Success! He no longer had to reach for the remote.

Hockney carried his new toy in his pocket when he returned to the lab on Monday. For nearly a month the device worked better than he hoped, its nickel-cadmium battery projecting noise control over every environment in which he found himself. In crowded

stores and restaurants he learned to touch tone down the background to a pleasant hum for several meters around him by tapping the modulator. At the office or at home, he became oblivious to unwanted sounds simply by tapping the gain. He kept his sound control device in his shirt pocket and learned to operate it with misdirected hand movements an unsophisticated observer might take for him simply scratching an itch.

He was not deaf to his surroundings, but neither was he deafened by them. He taught the device to control the world surrounding him and create silence where there was none. Fire engine sirens and ambulances no longer shrilled in his ears. Persistent auto alarms, honking horns, the roar of busses as well as the annoying commercials on radio stations came under his power and control.

The only disappointment was the initial device did not operate over as wide an area as he expected. At first he was able to dampen unwanted sound within a maximum of about five meters. He surmised this was a function of the small sized battery. He set about boosting the range and practiced at the lab among unsuspecting co-workers, like Stella. He attached a larger power supply which increased coverage, then discovered how to focus his dampener to an area small as within an arm's length.

Enough, he told himself with a smile, to soothe the most intimate moment.

* * *

Hockney might well have died under the wheels of the runaway truck if he had not stopped in mid stride and turned around to retrieve a penny from the gutter. The vehicle careened past him and ran right through the air space he would have occupied. Several bystanders on the sidewalk were startled enough to rush up and ask if he was all right.

“Well, of course I am,” he said more amused than concerned. “It missed me, didn’t it? Find a penny, pick it up.”

“You had your luck for the day, I’d say,” a woman with two shopping bags in her arms remarked.

Hockney tried to lay the matter to rest by asking if anyone saw where the pick-up went or if the driver stopped to apologize.

“The guy driving looked more like he was sorry he missed,” observed a man in a three piece suit. “Drivers like that ought to be arrested, gimme a break. Hell, give him a brake!”

Hockney merely smiled politely and pocketed the coin he retrieved. He waited for the light to change again before he attempted to cross the street.

If he thought about it, he might have marveled at the failure of his unconscious to connect the rifling of his locker with the feeling of being watched and this latest incident. He would have been even more surprised to learn it had been no accidental attempt on his life. But he did not think about these things as he left the store and traipsed home.

Hockney rested his grocery bag on the carpeted floor of the hallway in front of his apartment and fished for his keys. It was out of form for him, but he had left work early to do some much needed food shopping.

The door drifted open as his hand began to insert the key in the lock. Inside, the apartment was a shambles. He stood in the doorway and let the shock wash over him.

Desk drawers were emptied onto the floor and all his papers were mounded in a single huge pile in the center of the living room. It looked as if someone had spent time reading, then discarded the pages in a heap as each proved worthless.

Hockney stood staring for several seconds not knowing how to react. He heard the distinctive sound of the closet door glide in his bedroom. Someone had just closed it.

Horror at being invaded gave way to fear. It sounded as if the vandal was still here. Hockney looked around the room for a weapon. He picked up a paper weight thinking he might throw it to defend himself. It never occurred to him how useless the gesture would be against an armed intruder. Nor did he consider the option of retreating to the hallway to call for help. Anger was too strong an emotion to be overcome with mere intelligence.

He peered into the bedroom half hoping to find no one, and saw two well dressed men, their business suits out of place amid the disarray of his personal items and empty clothing drawers. They did not notice him at first but continued pawing through his closet. Foolishly, he decided to confront the men rather than run for help.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded. The paper weight hung limply at his side.

Both men looked up in surprise. With equal amazement, Hockney recognized the tall man he noticed sitting at the counter in the restaurant several days ago. The shorter of the two nodded toward the other. It was a tacit agreement between them; they moved toward Hockney slowly, as if stalking an animal.

Hockney dropped the paper weight, turned and ran.

The men were hampered by the clutter of bed clothes on the floor. The tall one lunged toward Hockney but tripped and fell into the open door frame. The other walked straight over the mattress which lay at an awkward angle on the bed. He was the first into the hallway where he looked for his quarry to the left and the right. Hockney had disappeared.

The second man made his way into the hall. Without saying a word, they chose opposite routes and set off in pursuit.

Hockney was hiding in the hall in the recess of the rear exit stairwell. He was prepared for the emergency door leading to the fire escape to open. As soon as he saw the handle turn he hoisted himself up off the steps using the handrails for support and kicked with all his might against the heavy metal as it began to swing away from him.

In his haste, his pursuer had been careless, had not expected the door to spring at him. He was flung backward with the force of the kick and slammed his head against the opposite wall. Hockney let the door close part way, took the time to check his handiwork. He saw that it was the shorter of the two men, decided this one was out for the count, and dragged the limp form back into the stairwell.

He knew the noise would bring the other running but instead of high tailing it down to the relative safety of the street below, Hockney began to climb. His apartment was on the third floor of a modern seven story building. He raced upward, heart beating fast with the rush of adrenalin, until he came out on the roof top where there was a community sun-deck and garden.

He had a plan, ill-formed, but workable. Now there was only one person chasing him and he felt anger, not fear. And foremost to his mind, he wanted some answers. He decided that too many strange things had happened recently. As he ran, he became certain those recent events, including the locker break-in and the truck that almost killed him, were somehow tied in with the men who were chasing him and had ransacked his apartment.

He remembered the uneasy feeling of being spied upon at lunch and realized his sense of unease had been legitimate.

But why? What were they after? Why would anyone be so interested in him? The men in his apartment were obviously looking for something and it didn't seem to matter whether he was alive or dead when they found it.

The answer hit him almost as hard as he had hit the man he left lying in the fire escape: They were after his sound controller. It was the only non-proprietary invention he had created at the lab or at home. Everything else was an open secret, accounted for and owned by his employers.

But how had they found out about it? And what the hell good would it do them if they got their hands on it?

He did not have time to theorize. Instead, he made a bee-line for the gardening shed of the roof garden which stood between the elevator and the fire exit. The shed door was never locked, and he knew it was filled with hand tools.

Quickly, Hockney selected a heavy rake with four-inch tines, a shovel and a hand trowel. He took an instant to punch the elevator call button, then raced back to the doorway he had just exited. He lay the rake tine side up a few inches from the door. The man following him would not fall for the same trick that had taken out his partner, but he might go for this old Laurel and Hardy maneuver.

Hockney needed delaying tactics. Every second he could squeeze out of the race meant he was closer to gaining the upper hand and getting some answers.

He ran back to the elevator which had just ascended to the roof-top. Holding the trowel like a knife, he carefully investigated the interior to be sure no one was inside. Empty.

Good. That meant it had by-passed anyone following him. The other intruder would have to use the fire escape stairs if he still wanted to get at him.

Hockney carefully positioned the shovel head between the doors which could not close as long as it was in the way. He used the trowel as a prying tool, peeled then ripped the cover off the elevator's control panel. Beneath the panel next to the row of buttons was an electrical outlet. While he worked he glanced anxiously over his shoulder to see if anyone had come through the roof-top door.

The screws holding down the button contacts had large heads. He considered the point of the trowel, then thought a coin might work. He fished through his pockets until he found the penny he picked up that day. It fit the screw heads. He scanned the panel interior, located the hot lead and return wires for the top button. Loosening these two screws, he carefully fished the cables out getting nearly two feet of extra length the electrician had left in the box after the pull.

He heard the door to the fire exit burst open.

The second man was much more cautious than his partner. He made sure the door stayed open before venturing out onto the roof tarmac.

Hockney winced when he heard the rake hit and looked out the open elevator doors to see the man rubbing his head. The trick had merely served to enrage him. When the man caught sight of Hockney's face ducking back between the elevator doors, he drunkenly made his way the twenty paces that separated them.

Hockney made no attempt to escape by riding the elevator down. Or, perhaps, the elevator did not respond quickly. Either way, the burglar found his quarry cowering in the corner with his back to the opening, head turned slightly toward his attacker with a look of fear on his face. The elevator doors were wide apart inviting entry.

The man reached out to grab Hockney who side-stepped. The wires completed their circuit when they landed on either side of the man's neck. His body reacted instantly. His spine arched as the electric shock sent him backward out the open elevator.

Hockney stood over the figure who lay curled in a fetal position a few feet from the rooftop planter box. "Now, my friend, you are going to explain why you and your buddy tore up my happy home."

He removed the man's belt which he used as a set of make-shift handcuffs. Then he tied the man's shoelaces together and searched pockets until he found a wallet and identification. He also found a gun.

He flipped the billfold open. Hockney was surprised to see a snapshot of himself smiling into a camera he had never known was focused on him. The man squirmed in his confinement. He was fully aware of Hockney's presence.

"You got a name?" Hockney asked when he saw his assailant's eyes were focused on him.

No response. The man struggled against his bonds, quieted when Hockney put the gun to his chest and pushed hard on it.

"Says here on your driver's license your name's Anderson. And it says you live in Phoenix. You're a long way from the Sun Belt, Anderson, and I don't think you're in town for a convention."

The man grunted, but said nothing. Hockney waved the trowel in front of Anderson's face with his free hand. "Want me to stick this in your eye, pal?" Hockney did not know if he was actually capable of performing such an act, but the threat was real enough for Anderson who finally spoke.

"No."

"Great. You can talk. Now, what were you guys looking for in my flat?"

"Money. What'd you think we were doing, trying on your clothes?"

Hockney flushed when he realized the trowel threat was being taken lightly. Then he got angry. He lifted the man by his coat collar, forced Anderson to his feet. He gave a shove that knocked the hobbled man back into the maw of the elevator where he fell to his knees on the floor.

"All right, a little more shock treatment ought to do the trick."

Hockney forced Anderson to turn his back. Although well out of reach of the wires, he did not know this. Hockney approached from behind and pretended to have the leads in his hands, poked the trowel into Anderson's neck.

"Two nice burn marks on your throat there, Anderson. Want a couple more just like 'em? All I have to do is put this second electrode up against your neck."

The man began to whimper.

"Now tell me who you're working for or I turn you into a couple of frog's legs in a biology experiment."

"The Network," he replied with considerable concern in his voice.

"What network is that, Anderson? Some kind of spy ring? Mafia? What?"

“The BCD television broadcasting network, dammit! I’m in the advertising department.”

This made sense to Hockney in a strange sort of way. He had a device that cancelled radio commercials and deadened the air around him. Maybe it worked on other media as well.

“You want my blab-out, is that it?”

Anderson showed definite signs of not wanting to answer any more questions so Hockney stood the prong of the trowel on the back of the man’s skull.

“All I gotta do is plant the other wire next to it, buddy. You’ll bounce like a basket ball. Now talk!”

“I will, okay, I will!” he said with a shudder. “We want the technology behind it destroyed, that’s all. That’s what we were looking for, your plans.”

“You were watching me in the cafe the other day, weren’t you Andy?”

“Knew you’d spotted me,” Anderson replied with some acrimony. “Followed you around for a week before that though. You never noticed a thing.”

Hockney’s attitude took an abrupt turn. Assessing the situation, he realized he had nowhere to run, no one who could protect him. His apartment was a shambles and there were bound to be more agents sent to get him.

“Who gives you and your buddy orders, Anderson?”

“We work for different networks. I never saw the guy before today.”

“You’re kidding. There’s more than just BCD out to get this?” Hockney asked skeptically.

Anderson again became reticent. Hockney waved the pistol in front of the man's face, then replaced the trowel with the gun, its snub nose pressed hard against his cranium.

Anderson began to whimper. "I'm just an ad guy," he said with tears of fear welling in his eyes. "I don't know the big picture any more than you do."

Hockney decided he was not going to get anything else from this bunny. Besides, he was running out of time. The other jock was probably climbing the stairs right now. He told Anderson to stay still, reattached the wires to their posts in the panel. Then he gave the man a shove with his foot and punched the ground floor button.

Hockney would take a chance there were only two men after him and the other had come to, was at that moment running the stairs after discovering the elevator did not work. The doors closed on the advertising executive who had resumed a kneeling position and begun frantically pulling at his shoe laces with both belted hands. He would have to free himself and run down the stairs because Hockney intended to rip the wires from their posts as soon as the doors opened in the lobby.

Hockney stepped cautiously out of the lift, pistol in hand. He dared not check his apartment or gather even a change of clothing, certain someone would be lying in wait. The feeling of being a fugitive began to sink in as he made his way into the underground garage where his car was parked

He pocketed the gun and bent low. He crept toward the vehicle, opened the driver's door quietly, inserted his key in the ignition. Before he could turn the switch, however, he felt a cold spot at the back of his neck.

“Nice try, but not good enough,” said a voice from the back seat. Foolishly, Hockney realized, he had not checked the back seat floorboard for anyone who might be hiding there.

“Hand over the keys like a good little boy.” Hockney did as he was told. “That’s the ticket. Now lace your fingers behind your head and step out slowly.”

The gun was only away from Hockney’s head long enough for his captor to slip it between the doorposts. Then it was under his chin and he was staring straight into the man’s eyes.

“Where is it, asshole?” With his free hand, the man patted Hockney’s chest and sides for weapons. He found the gun Hockney had taken from Anderson, slipped it into his own coat pocket.

“What are you talking about? Where is what? I don’t know what you’re getting at,” Hockney said defensively. There was no way his interrogator could be aware of the conversation on the roof, so Hockney feigned ignorance.

“Whatever you use to create the feed-back loop that’s been screwing up my equipment, asshole.”

Hockney realized how someone might have learned he had a sound dampener. Of course it would create feed-back when it blocked out a commercial, he suddenly realized, and it would automatically tell them where to look. Simple triangulation techniques would be able to pin-point the source of the problem. That was why they searched his apartment and ransacked his locker at work. Every time he used it he planted a red flag on his own doorstep.

Hockney maintained the presence of mind to keep the other man talking rather than immediately handing over the blab-out. The longer he talked the more he hoped someone would visit the garage and upset the balance of power. “Am I supposed to have some equipment you want?” he asked innocently.

“Listen wise guy, my repeaters have been blowing out all along the mountain range where our towers are. Whenever we boost the signal, your device fries one of them. My guys have been going crazy trying to track you down. Now that I got you I’m not leaving ’til you give it to me. It’s not in your apartment and it’s not in your locker at work so either you’re wearing it or you have it stashed some place. Now give and give quick or I get nasty with this.”

Cocking the gun, he waved it under Hockney’s nose. Hockney cringed. Being that close to a weapon unnerved him.

“Killing me does you no good,” he said almost in panic. “But okay. I know what you’re talking about. I stashed the only working model where it’s safe. And I gave the plans to a guy I work with and told him to send the schematics to certain people if I don’t claim them in person.” He prayed his lie did not sound as spontaneous as it was.

After a few seconds of thought, the man thumbed the hammer of the pistol back down to safety. “Who is this fellow you trust so implicitly?” he asked sweetly. “Near as we can tell, you don’t have any friends.”

In any other setting, that would have stung. But Hockney was thinking on his feet and maintained enough presence of mind to steer the conversation away from anyone he liked.

“My manager, Davis. He has them. And I do trust him. He knows how important a discovery like that could be.”

The man smiled as he motioned with his pistol. “Then I guess we’re just going to have to collect them from this joker, aren’t we? Back in the car. You drive.”

“Can I put my hands down now?” Hockney asked politely.

He received an irritated response. “Of course you can, asshole. Now get in the car. You’re driving.” The gun remained trained on Hockney as he slipped into the driver’s seat. The man with the gun moved around the hood and opened the side door, taking the passenger seat.

“Aren’t you going to wait for your partners?”

“Forget them. They work for other networks. I want this for my company and my department.”

“Do I get the keys back? Can’t drive without ’em.”

Momentarily confused for having made such an oversight, the man searched through his pants pockets for the key ring. Although he kept his eyes on Hockney, he moved his gun to his left hand in order to accommodate the retrieval of the keys from his seating position. He did not notice Hockney leaning slightly forward so that his hands, which were in plain sight on the steering wheel, were close enough to his breast pocket for him to tap an adjustment on the thumb pot of the blab-out. He smiled silently as he took the proffered keys. He was careful to hold them without allowing them to rattle. Hockney held his breath and inserted one in the ignition.

The magnified sound of the starter motor was so loud he felt it in his chest with an almost heart-stopping pain. However, he had been prepared for it and immediately turned

in his seat and lunged toward his assailant who sat stupefied with the explosion of ear-splitting noise. It was as if the man were just waiting there with a dumb expression on his face for Hockney to take the gun out of his hands.

The rumble of the engine continued to throb in their ears until Hockney touched his chest and turned down the gain.

“Amazing,” were the first words out of the other man’s mouth when the noise level dropped to normal. “So small you had it on you all the time. The technology in that thing must be cutting edge.”

Hockney refused to be distracted by the compliment. “Now the other gun,” he said. “Hand it over real gently.” The man did as instructed.

“Your turn to drive.” Hockney slipped out of his seat and opened the rear driver’s side door. In the rear seat, Hockney pulled the door closed behind him, motioned with his head for the man to slide across and get behind the wheel. He kept both weapons trained on his captive, a two fisted gunner.

“Get us moving. Now!” he said with such intensity the other man practically jumped into the seat Hockney had just vacated. In seconds they were at the gated exit. Hockney passed his card to the driver who inserted it in the exit slot and the white arm lifted. “Left here. Onto the freeway at Tenth Street,” Hockney directed.

He had no idea where he was headed, but at least he had a hostage with which to bargain. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw there were no cars on the on-ramp behind them and tossed one of the pistols out the window. When they were in the flow of traffic, he decided to take the offensive starting with what he thought were easy questions to answer.

“You seem to know a lot about me, now I want to know about you. Start with a name.”

“Bennett, George Bennett.”

“If you don’t work for the same people as Anderson, who do you work for?”

“How the hell’d you know Anderson’s name?” Bennett asked angrily. He turned and tried to face Hockney.

“Keep your eyes on the road, George. And let’s just say I had a brief conversation with him. He told me he works for BCD TV. Now, which network sent you?”

They moved with the flow of traffic. Hockney directed Bennett to take a lane heading south out of town. Bennett remained silent as Hockney reached over the seat and, gun in hand, asked him to hand over his wallet.

The same photo of himself he had found in Anderson’s billfold stared back at Hockney.

“You guys are real professional, aren’t you? Ever heard of privacy laws?” He found a business card that identified Bennett as an operating engineer for Overland Channel Diversified. It bore a New York address.

“How is it rivals to the teeth like you and BCD are working together? Don’t networks like OCD and BCD usually keep separate accounts?”

“You might say we formed a consortium just for you,” Bennett replied with a sarcastic tone to his voice.

“Somehow I find that a little hard to believe, ol’ buddy. No matter how flattering that would be. Why don’t you do some explaining? You and Anderson must not have had as much of a heart-to-heart as you’d like me to believe.”

When it seemed Bennett was not going to volunteer anything without being prodded, Hockney muscled the nose of the pistol in his neck. He had to keep it low so other drivers did not notice it.

“What’s there to tell? From your impromptu demonstration just now, I’d say it’s pretty obvious, wouldn’t you? We know you have something that could destroy our industry. We want to put it to rest. Sure we work for competing companies, but we have a common enemy: You. What’s so surprising about that?”

The simplicity of this argument was easy for Hockney to accept. He wondered how he could have been so stupid. He had kicked a sacred cow that was far too big for an amateur like himself to move off the road. Hockney remained unsure of his next move and settled into the back seat of his own car to think things over. He kept the gun trained on the driver, yet well below sight of vehicles they passed.

“What I don’t get is why it’s so important. I mean, all I have is some control over what I hear. It’s not a bomb or some kind of death ray. It certainly can’t affect the world on any large scale.”

“You really don’t get it, do you?” the man asked as he drove. “You think you have a nice little pet project that won’t hurt anybody, is that it? Well let me give you a bit of insight. You’re messing with the free world’s biggest revenue producer, a hundred-billion dollar annual business that nobody, and I mean nobody from the President on down wants to see screwed up. Not by you or any other hot-shot who can re-program a computer.”

Hockney was surprised to find himself elevated to such celebrity status. The President? Does he know about me? A chilling thought, that. He could not prevent

himself from asking Bennett why the blab-out was so personally antagonistic and what brought such an angry tone to his voice.

“You damn fool! You’re messing with my job! I got two kids in college, a wife, a mortgage and an SUV.” He delivered this statement with the rectitude of a father defending his family from a pillaging army. “All of them including the SUV want you taken out.” Bennett volunteered more: “Overland Channel Division and BCD are just in front of the pack you might say. Like in the ratings. Cable’s DOO is about as angry as it can get with DCT right behind. Not to mention the independents. Everyone wants you terminated. And I want you out of the picture just as much as they do.”

It looked like a lot of people wanted Hockney in pieces all of a sudden. Too bad no one wanted him whole.

“Is that why a truck almost wiped me out on my way home?” he asked as he stuck the revolver in the man’s right ear.

“Hey, take it easy with that thing.” Hockney withdrew the muzzle. “That’s better,” Bennett said with a loud exhale of breath. “That was none of our doing. We had a few guys from Wolf go ronin on us. Thought they’d take you out and solve the problem quickly. Me, I was against it. I want the technology and then I figure we can offer you a deal.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“A deal, dammit. Some kind of plan where we all make out. You included. We give you something, you give us your device and maybe we get to patent it. ’Course we’ll bury that patent real deep.” Bennett turned in his seat to try and catch Hockney’s eye. “An offer you can’t refuse. Know what I mean?”

One wave of the pistol and Bennett's eyes were back on the road.

Hockney said nothing as they continued south. After five minutes of silence, Bennett asked where they were going. Hockney looked up in time to see they were coming to the coast road turn off.

“Take this exit. We're going to the beach, Bennett. And you get to go surfing.”

For twenty minutes they followed the blue Pacific as it crested along the shoreline. Hockney waited until they reached the cliffs above Devil's Slide. He ordered the car to a stop at a turn-out just past the parking area. He slammed the door, took the keys and pocketed the pistol. Making it abundantly clear he had the gun trained on him, Hockney ordered Bennett to lead the way down the pathway. At the bottom of the hill, he told the engineer to disrobe.

“Take off my clothes? Here? You must be crazy,” was his indignant response.

“Not at all. You'll fit right in. Plenty of sun bathers out catching the late afternoon sun. Now strip.”

Bennett did as ordered. When he stood in his underwear and socks, Hockney saluted with the pistol and said, “To the buff.” The man removed his last articles of modesty.

With the rolled up pile of clothes in one hand and the gun in the other, Hockney could not help throwing a final farewell.

“Don't feel embarrassed, buddy. It's a nude beach.”

* * *

Hockney's first stop was at his own bank's ATM. He popped his card in the slot, punched buttons and asked for the maximum amount for a cash withdrawal. A line of

people began to form behind him. He continued to pile up twenties until there was an angry cry from one of those waiting.

“C’mon, pal. There won’t be enough left for the rest of us,” he heard over his shoulder as he forked the bills into a pile.

The machine finally refused to give him any more cash. His savings account was not depleted, but the words “Limit Exceeded” flashed on the liquid crystal display with fervid insistence.

Hockney knew that was not true, but he folded the wad into a thick roll and pushed it into his coat pocket. The chilly metal of the firearm met his fingertips like the wet nose of a dog.

He drove an hour and a half east before he tried a real credit card. He asked for a cash advance and it gave him one transaction before spitting his card out denying access. He had one more card to try before he pulled over for the night. This time he drove two hours south of his previous location to a generic machine in a gas station somewhere past Stockton. He was almost certain it would fail. He was right. The machine did not even give him a single withdrawal before it flashed its false signal.

He cruised slowly through a low-rent section of town until a gaunt young man with furtive eyes approached the car. No, Hockney did not want any drugs, thanks anyway. But he was able to sell all his credit cards for \$50 each, including his company card and the ones that no longer worked. He assured the young man they were all fresh. Then he traded his two-year-old automobile for the fellow’s motorcycle and helmet. He rode that north for the better part of the night. A few miles outside Eureka, he gave the bike to a

fisherman in exchange for a 20 year-old Ford which he drove across the state line into Oregon.

He continued north.

* * *

Portland at that time of year was almost as cold as Canada. It was the affinity of a lost soul that drew the gray cloud cover down to his shoulders. He thought about Bennett standing stark naked on the beach and laughed out loud. The bastard's probably comfortable as a roach back in The Big Apple right now. Bet he's got a living room fire going.

Hockney realized he should worry more about who Bennett called once he got to a phone. His manager, Davis, would have been roused out of bed by midnight visitors. And, of course, he would know nothing.

Days became weeks and Hockney grew a beard and let his hair grow long. In two months he looked nothing like the pictures found in Anderson and Bennett's wallets. It was an old ruse, but it worked so far. He stayed in camp grounds and coastal recreation areas as he worked his way slowly further north, picking up electronic parts as he went. Thank God for Radio Shack.

It was time to make the call.

He held the DTMF tone generator up to the mouthpiece of the pay phone. It was the same type of equipment he had used in his first blab-out.

The irony was not lost on him. Funny how things turn out, he thought as the tones sounded in his ear. This could have ended its life as a sound dampener. Yet, here it was

back in use as its maker had intended placing a call on the network. An illegal call, but a call nonetheless.

Relays in various central offices clicked as the signal was accepted into the system. Another switch responded with identifying codes, then connected him to an ESS in Ottawa. He confused the SL-1 there into thinking the signal had come from 1000 miles south. Then he bounced it off a geo-stationary satellite and into the central office of an obscure switch in Orem, Utah. He made the switch there believe he was in Topeka by feeding it the wrong identity code.

By the time his call reached its destination, there was no way anyone monitoring it could be sure they had traced it to its true source. Given enough time, they could find their way back to within approximately 500 miles of him. Just in case he was wrong about how much time they would need to get there, his message would be short and to the point.

Hockney held a cassette recorder up to the mouthpiece of the hand-set when he knew his call had been completed. A familiar voice answered, then asked persistently who was calling.

He knew his played-back tones would be captured by listening devices at the other end. As the sounds stopped, Hockney spoke with remarkable restraint.

“Good evening Mr. President,” he said with what he thought was the proper amount of deference. “I have a message for you and everyone else clandestinely listening in on this call. Those few musical notes you just heard have now entered the nationwide telephone system and are in storage. They are similar to a virus, a computer virus. When I instruct them, they will turn common ordinary telephones into individual sound

controllers exactly like the one I invented. You know what I'm talking about. Every home in America will be able to turn off radio and television station advertising in every major market at my command. It will eat you out of the White House, Mr. President, unless I get a clean bill of health from your people. Do you understand me?"

Hockney waited for a response. He knew they would try to keep him on the line as long as possible in an effort to trace the call. Finally the president spoke: "I hear you Mr. Hockney."

"Good. Then you know I'm telling the truth. You have first-hand accounts of what my sound controller can do. Now here's the deal. I've built a large sending unit somewhere in the mid-West which you will never be able to locate. Believe me when I say it is capable of silencing the entire country and taking out all this nation's commercial broadcasts. All of them, radio and television and, for good measure, it will gum up cable and dish receivers."

Another long silence before the voice again spoke. Hockney had no real way of knowing if it was, indeed, the President, but it certainly sounded like him. "We are listening."

"Furthermore, I have copied the instructions for constructing the unit out of commonly available electronic equipment and am prepared to mail copies to every major newspaper in the country. Only you can stop this from happening, Mr. President. What more need I say? I leave it up to you. Do you really want the country dropped into complete commercial radio and television silence? All I ask is you call off these . . ."

The firestorm was instantly visible from where Hockney stood inside the pay telephone booth high atop the Space Needle in Seattle. He estimated it was probably

produced by a 20 megaton device, the detonation of which would be blamed on terrorists. Its epicenter was near Gardiner, Montana, and it took out big chunks of that state, Idaho, Wyoming and a piece of Utah, a bright red glow on the horizon just beyond the Cascade Mountain range and silhouetted by Mount Rainier.

“Looking straight at it, I guess that means no.”

Hockney was pleased he had not told the truth about where his giant blab-out was hidden and relieved that less populated states were the victims. His misdirection had at least minimized the human cost. He placed a finger on the hook switch, quickly got dial tone. He dropped two coins in the slot, waited for the second dial tone and hit the touch-tone pad with the number sequence that remotely operated his device. He had not been bluffing.

Hockney leaned against the phone booth glass with a sigh and spoke as if he were still on the line with the President.

“Have to hang up now. I have plenty of work to do. Envelopes to address, stamps to purchase, that sort of thing. And I ought to have plenty of time to complete my task because you will be off the air for a long time to come. Goodbye.”

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